

JOURNALISM ARGENTINE STYLE: A Semester in Buenos Aires

by PAUL ALONSO

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FOR A STUDENT, RESEARCHER, OR JOURNALIST, there is no better experience than studying abroad. I went to Argentina in the fall of 2006, and I spent four months taking graduate courses in the master's of journalism program at the Uni-

versidad de Buenos Aires (UBA), thanks to a Joe R. and Teresa Lozano Long Study Abroad Scholarship.

Buenos Aires has more than 3 million inhabitants in the city proper and around 12 million in the so-called Gran Buenos Aires area. It also has one of the largest middle classes in Latin America and a solid national identity. It is known for being one of the most European cities of the region, but it also reflects the contradictions and contrasts of the continent. Regarding academics, UBA has an important tradition. It was founded in 1821 and now has thirteen departments and seventy-two undergraduate professional career concentrations. More than 30 percent of the national scientific research is conducted in this institution.

While the master's in journalism is a recently created graduate program, it has a very experienced faculty. It is important to mention that Argentina is world-renown for the excellence of its journalists and writers. So it seemed a great opportunity to study *in situ* my two main areas of interest. I took three seminars at the UBA: Cultural Journalism, Press and Society, and Political Journalism.

It was remarkable the way Argentine professors linked all the areas of study with national politics. This is especially understandable in a country with such a dramatic recent history and constant confrontation between the press and the political power. The bloody military dictatorship that started with the coup of 1976 maintained strong control over the press (despite the fact that mainstream media initially supported the coup that removed Isabel Peron from power). From its first appearance, the military said that it "would not allow any sort of opposition." This assertion led to one of the cruelest Dirty Wars in the region, which culminated in approximately 30 thousand *desaparecidos* (missing persons), including at least 100 journalists. In addition, the coverage of the Falkland Islands war (between Argentina and Great Britain) was an event in which the media went along with the military's lies and created an overwhelming amount of disinformation, the excess of which finally contributed to the end of the military dictatorship in 1982. Most of the professors I had at UBA had experienced this period of Argentine history, and some had worked as journalists at the time.

I especially enjoyed the Political Journalism course, taught by Mabel Thwaites, former editor of the newspaper *Clarín*. It was an insider's view of how politics are managed within the mainstream media, and she also provided an overview of the relationship between reporters and politicians. Prof. Alejandro Horowitz was perhaps the most controversial faculty member. He taught the Press and Society course

from a historical point of view. While he offered a detailed critique of several aspects of political power, our final paper for the course was to analyze how the military coup of 1976 was reported in the major Argentinean newspapers, and how that coverage could be interpreted. Last but not least, Prof. Daniel Ulanovsky conducted a useful seminar/workshop on the art and potential of narrative journalism. In addition, my classmates brought varied viewpoints to the discussion, sometimes controversial. The students had very different backgrounds,

and music were very active). But Palermo is also a great place to listen to people from all over the city, both rich and poor. I was particularly interested in hearing citizens' opinions on the consequences of the national economic crisis of 2001 and getting involved in the daily cultural dynamics.

Despite a superficial prosperity among the middle class, corruption was one of the main characteristics in Menem's government during the 1990s. Following the Asian economic crisis, the newly elected President Fernando de la Rúa

economy began to stabilize due to a drastic devaluation of the currency, and since 2003 the country has had a period of constant economic growth. But the scars of the crisis were still apparent everywhere—discussed in every taxicab or bus I took, in every conversation with the people I met, and at every dinner table at which I was present.

I won't have enough space here to tell all the stories I collected or relate all the impressions that I gathered. I have written down many of them, but others remain inexpressible, that

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but most were undergraduate professors or journalists trying to reflect more profoundly on their profession. Their comments and local knowledge were incredibly valuable.

But my learning experience in Argentina did not end there, and it did not include only graduate studies. The studio I rented was in the middle-class neighborhood of Palermo, on the eighth floor of a building in Guemes Street, close to the Bulnes metro stop. The neighborhood of Palermo mixes commercial and residential areas. There are many restaurants (with diverse prices and quality) and a wide variety of cultural events (theater

in 1999 faced a country where unemployment had risen to a critical point and the economy was entering a recession. When the economic crisis worsened, the middle class criticized and distanced themselves from government policies. In 2001, people began withdrawing large sums of money from their bank accounts, causing a run on the banks. The government enacted a set of measures (the infamous Corralito) that effectively froze all bank accounts, allowing for only minor sums of cash to be withdrawn. This led to a popular insurrection that climaxed in the violent incidents of December 19 and 20, 2001. The following year the

kind of knowledge one gains only after living a considerable amount of time in a new city. Both academic and practical experiences in Buenos Aires were stimulating, and I even wrote a few stories that were published in newspapers. However, the local friends I made there are the most vivid image I carried with me on the plane back to Austin.

Paul Alonso is a master's candidate in the Latin American Studies program with Journalism. His study abroad experience was made possible by a Joe R. and Teresa Lozano Long Study Abroad Scholarship. ☀



Left to right: 1) Fellow students became good friends (Alonso far right), 2) Asado in Puerto Madero, 3) Classmates of the Master's of Journalism, Universidad de Buenos Aires